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Question Time: Cheap, reliable passenger rail?

Would you use it? Should state pay?

By Rob Burgess

Tribune night editor

[**Editor's note:** To participate in future queries, keep an eye on our Twitter and Facebook accounts.]

On Oct. 1, in Indianapolis, Amtrak CEO Joe Boardman announced the new amenities for the Hoosier State line, which runs 196 miles between Indianapolis and Chicago four days a week.

"Amtrak is adding free Wi-Fi, modest food service and business-class seating to a passenger line that runs between Indianapolis and Chicago, while Indiana remains in talks with a private vendor that wants to operate the line," reported The Associated Press Oct. 2.

This got us thinking; why not expand rail service even further? So, we wanted to know: "If cheap, reliable passenger rail service was available between all major cities in the country would you use it? Why or why not? Should government spend more money to make this a reality? Why or why not?"

It should be noted, almost all the responses we received were in favor of the idea. In fact, with 103 likes, 55 comments and 5,146 people reached on our Facebook page, it was one of Question Time's most popular posts.

Yes

"It would boost the economy, by leaps and bounds. One only need look to Boston, NYC, DC and Chicago. Rapid transit is open to one and all, regardless of economic status!" — **Jayne Duncan Stites**

"In a perfect world Amtrak would have its own rail line, instead of paying a premium to use the nations freight lines like NS, CSX, UP, BNSF. But the 'landlocked' U.S. and property owners (whoever it is, private or government) would have a fit. Maybe retro-fitting private rail, like monorail style, over the tops of interstates would work. It only costs money. It would be the most expensive infrastructure project in U.S. history." — **Jeff**

Douglass

"I would indeed use it. I long for good mass transit. In Europe you can get every place by train and bus. I can work while riding the train, read or sleep. Cannot do that while driving (and expect to live, anyway.) Growing up on the East Coast we didn't have a car 'til I was 10. Took trains and buses every place, or walked. Have taken the Megabus to Chicago and it is a great way to go." — **Peggy Phillips**

No

“No, can't think of any reason to go to a big city. Kokomo is even getting too big for me.” — **Chap Taylor**

“The problem is that you need a car to get around once you get to where you're going. If you rent a car, you've spent anything that you saved by taking the train.” — **Rebecca Scheiderer Davis**

“Wait a minute! Isn't rail what we used back in the day? Haven't they been tearing up tracks all over the country for years to implement bike trails? Ya, I'm sure that's not gonna cost a ton no matter who uses it. It will still cost the average person an arm and a leg to ride.” — **Mac Bowers**

Our answers

“I just don't think it's a viable option in today's world in terms of city-to-city travel. Travel-wise for my family, it's all about what saves the most time. So, anything that's not within driving distance (i.e. Cincinnati, Chicago, Louisville), we're more likely to fly. Although for one-day excursions to Chicago, for like a Cubs game, taking the South Shore to the Red Line to get to Wrigley Field is much easier on the nerves than driving the Dan Ryan Expressway.” — **Josh Sigler**

“Yes I would. While I like the freedom of driving and find many drives preferable to dealing with a train/subway/bus schedule, I'd use rail if it were a good option and the math told me that it was more cost-effective than driving to a given spot. However, there are a ton of problems, first being

that once you're dumped in some other city, what then? Will you be able to get around? Developing more public transportation is a big undertaking and requires a lot of convincing. After all, we had rail transportation as a regular option and it's faded away. The public issue is the biggest. People have to be convinced to overcome their desire for personal driving freedom on some occasions, and also their own social stigmas against public transport. Best way to do that is to point out that huge quantities of American money leave the country and go to OPEC (or wherever else we buy oil from). I don't even want to see those numbers, they'll be too disheartening. Public transport will have to be shown to be beneficial to American interests and keeping more of our money within our own economy to get some people overcome their doubts. And again, once you take a train from Kokomo to Indy, or Indy to Pittsburgh, or wherever you go, there has to be city-wide public transit system that visitors can make sense of.

Otherwise it's useless." — **Pedro Velazco**

"Yes. Yes. Yes. A thousand times, yes. Europe does it and it's great. I would love to listen to music and read on the way to work instead of white-knuckling the steering wheel while fighting traffic. With fossil fuels dwindling and pollution ever-growing we have to start thinking like this. It sounds like a huge undertaking, but you know what else sounded impossible before it happened? The Interstate Highway System. When Congress authorized President Dwight D. Eisenhower's \$25 billion plan in 1956 it was the largest public works project in the country's history. I'd argue that was

a very successful government program. Let's do the same thing with rail. Think of the jobs it would create and the benefits of the finished product."

— **Rob Burgess**

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